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ABSTRACT

The degree to which college students agree with common myths about rape was investigated, using the Attitude Toward Rape Questionnaire. The effect of gender and years in college on student attitudes was also assessed. The sample consisted of 500 randomly-selected students from a state-assisted, four-year residential university in Ohio. The majority of on-campus students agreed with four of eight common myth statements about rape, males more so than females and underclassmen more so than upperclassmen. The majority of students agreed that rape is a sex crime and is a male exercise in power over women, when in fact, rape is basically an act of violence. The majority of students also believed that during a rape a woman should do everything she can to resist. It is suggested that this belief may indicate a general lack of factual information about rape. Females disagreed to a greater degree than did males to the following myths: (1) in some situations a charge of rape is unjustified; (2) women provoke rape by their appearance and behavior; and (3) if a woman is going to be raped, she might as well relax and enjoy it. Some suggestions for educating students about rape are included. (SW)

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# Differences in College Students' Belief in Common Myths About Rape by Gender and Year in College

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was (1) to describe the degree to which current college students agreed with common myths about rape, (2) to determine if this degree of agreement differed by gender, and (3) to determine if the degree of agreement decreased with increased exposure to a college environment. The degree of agreement with common myths about rape of 500 randomly selected students from a northwestern Ohio, state-assisted, four-year residential university was measured using the Attitude Toward Rape Questionnaire developed by Barnett and Feild. The majority of on-campus students agreed with four of eight common myth statements about rape, males more so than females and underclassmen more so than upperclassmen.

Rape connotes a multitude of contradictory actions to individuals (Calvert, 1974; Brownmiller, 1975; Field, 1978) to such an extent that states differ in regard to their legal definitions of rape (Groth, 1979). How one chooses to define rape has a great deal to do with one's attitudes on the subject. A study by Field (1978) indicated that an individual's attitude toward rape was influential in the victim's reporting of a rape, the writing of rape laws and legislation, the processing and investigation of rape complaints by police, the physical and psychological care administered by medical personnel, and the treatment of rape victims by judges, juries, and attorneys.

Evidence suggests that there is a relationship between individuals' attitudes toward rape and their view of the societal rights and roles of women (Weidner & Griffitt, 1983). Women's rights and roles have traditionally been defined from a sex stereotypical orientation which still persists today (Nicholson, 1984). That is, research continues to suggest that feminine characteristics are viewed as less desirable than masculine traits and for the most part males are viewed as the superior sex (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, & Vogel, 1972). Field (1978) found that viewing women in traditional ways tends to perpetuate several myths about rape, such as rape is a means through which men satisfy their sexual needs and that the woman is at fault when a rape occurs. Rape is a very complicated and misunderstood topic and thus abounds with such myths and misconceptions (Groth, 1979). Research suggests that some people find it easier to adhere to the myths than to try to understand the many complex and interrelated factors contributing to this crime (Thornton, Rychman, & Robbins, 1982).

One specific population which appears to be particularly susceptible to myths about rape is college students (Schultz, 1975). Schultz attributes this to their lack of knowledge about the topic of rape. In a study of college students' attitudes toward rape, Barnett and Feild (1977) found that males were quite different from females in their attitudes toward rape and tended to believe many of the myths regarding rape. A study by Broverman et al. (1972) showed that, in addition to gender, level of education influenced the degree to which sexist attitudes were developed. Yankelovich (1974), Brigante (1972), and Leibowitz (1975) found that college attendance was associated with decreased preference for traditional sex-role interests, attitudes, and behaviors. Feldman and Newcomb (1969) reported that students become more liberal in their sex-role attitudes from freshman to senior year. Feldman and Newcomb (1969) concluded that students bring stereotypical belief systems to college, but increased time in college yields to more complex, less traditional views of masculinity and femininity.

The results of the studies cited are limited by several methodological constraints some of which are the inability to generalize results to populations other than those sampled and the possible effect that a dynamic society has on the consistency of results found five to ten years previously. Given these limitations, the purpose of the study was twofold:

1. to describe the degree to which current college students agree with common myths about rape and to determine if this degree of agreement differs by gender.
2. to determine if the degree of agreement with common myths about rape decreases with increased exposure to a college environment.

## METHOD

### Population and Sample

The population consisted of all on-campus residents of a northwestern Ohio, state-assisted, four-year residential university. The university offers a wide variety of programs within six undergraduate colleges and includes 60 master's and 9 doctoral programs. The approximately 17,000 students are predominately Caucasian (94%) and from the state of Ohio (93%). Of the 17,000 students, approximately 8,000 (3,200 males and 4,800 females) live in 21 residence halls (two all-male, six all-female, and 13 co-educational) including 1,000 who live in Greek units (14 sororities and 17 fraternities). The sampling frame was a computerized list of all on-campus residents. A random sample of 500 students was selected from this list and mailed via campus mail the data collecting instrument.

### Instrument

The instrument was a mailed survey designed to measure students' attitudes toward rape. The survey consisted of two demographic items, gender and year in college, and the Attitudes Toward Rape Questionnaire (ATR) developed by Barnett and Feild (1977). The ATR contains 25 statements that reflect myths about rape (Schwendinger & Schwendinger, 1974). The respondent is asked to indicate the level of agreement with each statement on a six-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, mildly agree, mildly disagree, disagree, strongly disagree). Statements were scored with a one for strongly agree through a six for strongly disagree. Thus, the higher scores indicated more disagreement with the myths about rape. The authors of the ATR do not present any evidence of construct validity nor test-retest reliability.

Data Collection

The surveys were mailed during the thirteenth week of a sixteen-week semester in the Fall of 1985. Students were asked to respond within five days. Within the five days 163 surveys were returned. The following week a duplicate survey was mailed to the entire sample since it was impossible to determine who returned initially as a result of the promised anonymity of response. The students were instructed to discard the survey if they had already returned one, or to please return the completed one within five days if they had not. The second mailing produced an additional 160 surveys for a total return rate of 65%.

RESULTS

Prior to conducting the analyses related to the purpose of this study, an alpha factor analysis of the ATR was performed. The factor analysis was utilized to reduce the possibility of obtaining spurious results caused by the multitude of possible comparisons of the 25 ATR myths by 2 and 4 levels of gender and year in college, respectively. The factor analysis produced 8 factors that accounted for 44% of the total variance. Subsequent analyses used a student's 8 factor scores rather than the student's 25 item responses. A factor score was calculated by summing the responses to the myths defining a factor, divided by the number of myths summed. The largest factor loading for a given myth determined which factor the myth defined. For example, seven ATR myth statements defined factor one. Table 1 presents the ATR myth statements that define a given factor as well as the resulting summary myth statement for each factor.

Table 1

*Factor Labels and Defining Items from the ATR*

| Factor# | Summary Myth Statement | Item# | ATR Myth Statement |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | In some situations a charge of rape is unjustified. | 22 | A charge of rape two days after the act has occurred is probably not rape. |
| | | 21 | "Nice" women do not get raped. |
| | | 19 | A raped woman is a less desirable woman. |
| | | 20 | The degree of a woman's resistance should be the major factor in determining if a rape has occurred. |
| | | 24 | In order to protect the male, it should be difficult to prove that a rape has occurred. |
| | | 25 | It would so some women some good to get raped. |
| | | 2 | A woman cannot be raped against her will. |
| 2 | Women provoke rape by their appearance and behavior. | 18 | In forcible rape, the victim always causes the crime. |
| | | 6 | Women provoke rape by their appearance or behavior. |
| | | 1 | In most cases when a women was raped, she was asking for it. |
| | | 12 | Rape of a woman by a man she knows can be defined as a "woman who changed her mind afterward." |
| | | 4 | Most women secretly desire to be raped. |
| | | 11 | Women are trained by society to be rape victims. |
| 3 | Rape is a sex crime. | 7 | Rape is a sex crime. |
| | | 16 | The reason most rapists commit rape is for sex. |
| | | 8 | Rapists are sexually frustrated individuals. |
| 4 | Rape is the worst crime, committed by mentally sick individuals, who deserve to be severely punished. | 14 | All rapists are mentally sick. |
| | | 13 | Rape is the worst crime that can be committed. |
| | | 15 | A man who has committed rape should be given no less than 30 years of imprisonment. |
| 5 | If a woman is going to be raped, she might as well relax and enjoy it. | 3 | If a woman is going to be raped, she might as well relax and enjoy it. |
| 6 | Rape is a male exercise in power over women. | 10 | Rape provides the opportunity for many rapists to show their manhood. |
| | | 9 | Rape is a male exercise in power over women. |
| | | 23 | Rape is a humiliating experience for a woman. |
| 7 | A woman should be responsible for preventing her victimization in a rape. | 17 | A woman should be responsible for preventing her victimization in a rape. |
| 8 | During a rape, a woman should do everything she can to resist. | 5 | During a rape, a woman should do everything she can do to resist. |

Table 2 indicates the percentage of students that responded to each of the six agreement categories for the eight ATR factors.

Table 2

*Percentage of Agreement/Disagreement to the Eight Factors on the ATR*

| | Total (N = 323) | | | | | | Male (N = 127) | | | | | | Female (N = 196) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Factor# | SA | A | MA | MD | D | SD | SA | A | MA | MD | D | SD | SA | A | MA | MD | D | SD |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 9 | 24 | 36 | 3 | 5 | 10 | 13 | 28 | 41 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 6 | 21 | 66 |
| 2 | 1 | 3 | 9 | 13 | 27 | 46 | 3 | 5 | 13 | 19 | 32 | 29 | 0 | 2 | 7 | 9 | 25 | 56 |
| 3 | 19 | 16 | 18 | 14 | 19 | 14 | 20 | 17 | 18 | 16 | 17 | 11 | 18 | 16 | 18 | 18 | 19 | 16 |
| 4 | 17 | 23 | 20 | 18 | 13 | 9 | 12 | 18 | 15 | 22 | 18 | 15 | 19 | 26 | 24 | 15 | 10 | 6 |
| 5 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 14 | 77 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 8 | 15 | 69 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 13 | 83 |
| 6 | 28 | 18 | 22 | 11 | 11 | 10 | 27 | 18 | 18 | 12 | 13 | 12 | 29 | 18 | 24 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| 7 | 6 | 12 | 28 | 18 | 22 | 14 | 10 | 19 | 31 | 15 | 17 | 9 | 4 | 7 | 27 | 20 | 26 | 17 |
| 8 | 26 | 20 | 19 | 20 | 9 | 6 | 25 | 25 | 24 | 15 | 6 | 5 | 27 | 17 | 16 | 23 | 11 | 6 |

NOTE. The numbers in the body of the table are percentages rounded to the nearest whole percent which accounts for sums slightly larger or smaller than 100%.

More than 50% of the students surveyed agreed (SA+A+MA) with the following four myths:

1. Rape is a sex crime (Factor 3, 53%).
2. Rape is the worst crime, committed by mentally sick individuals, who deserve to be severely punished (Factor 4, 60%).
3. Rape is a male exercise in power over women (Factor 6, 68%).
4. During a rape, a woman should do everything she can to resist (Factor 8, 65%).

The *t*-ratios produced by an independent *t*-test in Table 3 indicate that at an alpha level equal to or less than .05 there was no evidence of a difference in the mean degree of agreement between males and females for three of the four myths (Factors 3, 6, 8) to which more than 50% of the students agreed; however, to the myth (Factor 4) that "Rape is the worst crime, committed by mentally sick individuals, that deserve to be severely punished," the females' mean was less than the males'. If the middle of the six-point scale (3.5) is used as the dividing point between agreeing and disagreeing, then the average female tended to mildly agree with this myth while the average male tended to mildly disagree with the myth.

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics and t-Test Results by Gender for Each of the ATR Factors*

| | Males (N=127) | | Females (N=196) | | | | | Effect |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Factor | M | SD | M | SD | t-Ratio | t-Prob | $Eta^2$ | Size[a] |
| 1 | 4.79 | 0.82 | 5.43 | 0.47 | 8.98 | .00* | .20 | .90 |
| 2 | 4.59 | 0.80 | 5.25 | 0.69 | 7.99 | .00* | .17 | .83 |
| 3 | 3.27 | 1.24 | 3.49 | 1.27 | 1.52 | .13 | .01 | -- |
| 4 | 3.60 | 1.22 | 2.88 | 1.06 | 5.62 | .00* | .09 | .61 |
| 5 | 5.41 | 1.09 | 5.74 | 0.72 | 3.30 | .00* | .03 | .38 |
| 6 | 3.00 | 0.92 | 2.82 | 1.00 | 1.58 | .12 | .01 | -- |
| 7 | 3.35 | 1.44 | 4.09 | 1.35 | 4.68 | .00* | .06 | .53 |
| 8 | 2.68 | 1.40 | 2.92 | 1.58 | 1.40 | .16 | .01 | -- |

NOTE. *t*-Prob values of .00 have resulted from rounding to the nearest hundredth.

* Indicates statistically significant difference because *t*-Prob ≤ alpha level

[a] Effect size = $(M_{males} - M_{females})/SD_{total}$

The *t*-ratios and descriptive statistics presented in Table 3 show that males differ from females on five of the eight factors. Of the five mean differences in the degree of agreement with myths about rape, three of these differences (Factors 1, 2, 5) are such that the average male and female were both disagreeing with the myth; however, the females disagreed to a greater degree than did the males. On Factor 7, "A woman should be responsible for preventing her victimization in a rape," the average male mildly agreed with this myth while on the average the females mildly disagreed. The eta squared statistic in Table 3 indicates the percentage of variance in a factor score that can be accounted for by gender; whereas, the effect size value indicates the distance that one mean is from the other mean in standard deviation units.

Table 4 presents the mean and standard deviation for each factor broken down by year in college. The results of a one-way analysis of variance ($\alpha = .05$) utilized to determine if the degree of agreement with common myths about rape decreased with increased exposure to a college environment are also presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA Results by Year for Each of the ATR Factors

| | Freshman (N=140) | | Sophomore (N=90) | | | Junior (N=67) | | | Senior (N=26) | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Factor | M | SD | M | SD | ES[a] | M | SD | ES | M | SD | ES | F-Ratio | F-Prob | $ETA^2$ |
| 1 | 5.14 | 0.73 | 5.15 | 0.64 | -- | 5.28 | 0.68 | -- | 5.21 | 0.87 | -- | 0.61 | .61 | .01 |
| 2[b] | 4.89 | 0.90 | 4.94 | 0.74 | .06 | 5.19 | 0.66 | .39 | 5.16 | 0.66 | .34 | 2.72 | .05* | .03 |
| 3[c] | 3.20 | 1.22 | 3.36 | 1.28 | .03 | 3.66 | 1.22 | .37 | 4.03 | 1.32 | .65 | 4.36 | .01* | .04 |
| 4[d] | 3.05 | 1.19 | 3.03 | 1.08 | -.02 | 3.52 | 1.13 | .40 | 3.29 | 1.42 | .20 | 3.08 | .03* | .03 |
| 5 | 5.49 | 1.05 | 5.72 | 0.65 | -- | 5.70 | 0.87 | -- | 5.65 | 0.80 | -- | 1.56 | .20 | .01 |
| 6 | 2.77 | 0.96 | 2.91 | 1.05 | -- | 3.15 | 0.94 | -- | 2.90 | 0.78 | -- | 2.39 | .07 | .02 |
| 7 | 3.79 | 1.33 | 3.75 | 1.47 | -- | 3.92 | 1.59 | -- | 3.62 | 1.47 | -- | 0.35 | .79 | .00 |
| 8 | 2.77 | 1.51 | 3.01 | 1.49 | -- | 2.63 | 1.51 | -- | 3.04 | 1.59 | -- | 1.06 | .37 | .01 |

* Indicates statistically significant difference because F-Prob ≤ alpha level

[a] ES indicates effect size = $(M_{upperclass} - M_{freshmen})/SD_{total}$

[b] Junior's mean > Freshmen's mean

[c] Senior's mean > Freshmen's and Sophomore's mean and Junior's mean > Freshmen's mean

[d] Junior's mean > Freshmen's and Sophomore's mean

The F-ratios in Table 4 associated with Factors 2-4 are all of sufficient magnitude to conclude that there is a difference in the mean degree to which freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors agree with those three myths. Post hoc Duncan analyses of the means indicated that:

1. juniors disagree more than do freshmen with the myth that "women provoke rape by their appearance and behavior."
2. seniors and juniors mildly disagree while freshmen and sophomores mildly agree with the myth that "Rape is a sex crime."

3. juniors agree less than do freshmen and sophomores with the myth that rape is the worst crime, committed by mentally sick individuals, who deserve to be severely punished."

The eta squared statistic in Table 4 indicates the amount of variance in the factor scores that can be accounted for by year in school. The effect size (ES) in Table 4 is the distance that the sophomore or junior or senior mean is from the freshman mean in total group standard deviation units. For example, on Factor 2, the mean for the seniors is .34 of a standard deviation greater than the freshmen's mean. For a given factor any two effect sizes can be subtracted to obtain a new effect size with a different reference point. For example, on Factor 2, the juniors' mean is .33 (.39 - .06) standard deviations greater than the sophomores' mean.

## DISCUSSION

Prior to conducting the analyses related to the purpose of this study, a factor analysis of the ATR Questionnaire developed by Barnett and Feild (1977) was performed. The factor analytic procedure reduced the 25 original myth about rape statements to 8 composite myth statements.

The analysis of the data with respect to the degree to which college students agreed with common myths about rape indicated that more than 50% of the students surveyed agreed (MA, A, SA) with 4 of the 8 myths. The majority of students agreed that rape is a sex crime and is a male exercise in power over women, when in fact, rape is basically an act of violence (Qureski, 1979). The majority of students also believed the myth that during a rape a woman should do everything she can to resist. This belief may not indicate a belief in a myth, but rather an awareness of a different approach for dealing with a rape situation. Medea and Thompson (1974) found that a rapist expects a woman to go along with him and that in some cases resistance on the part of

the woman may be sufficient to discourage the rapist; however, the degree of resistance, if any, is dependent upon the man, the situation, and the woman's personality.

This study found, as did Barnett and Feild (1977) and Broverman et al. (1972), that males differed from females in their attitudes toward rape. The males and females in this study differed on five of the eight myths such that on three of the five myths both sexes disagreed with the myth; however, the females disagreed to a greater degree than did the males to the following myths:

1. In some situations a charge of rape is unjustified.
2. Women provoke rape by their appearance and behavior.
3. If a woman is going to be raped, she might as well relax and enjoy it.

Females mildly agreed that "Rape is the worst crime, committed by mentally sick individuals, who deserve to be severely punished; while males tended to mildly disagree. Females mildly disagreed that "A woman should be responsible for preventing her victimization in a rape" whereas males mildly agreed to this myth.

The five differences between males and females were not only statistically significant but also produced effect sizes that ranged from .38 to .90. For example, an effect size of .90 means that one mean is .90 of a standard deviation larger than the other mean. Effect sizes greater than .33 are typically considered to be worthy of consideration. The eta squared statistic for the five gender differences ranged from .03 to .20. The eta squared statistic indicates the percentage of variance in attitude toward rape that can be accounted for by the gender variable. Thus, gender does not

explain a high percentage of the variability in attitude toward rape but it is a variable to consider when investigating issues related to rape.

The results obtained in this study concerning the impact of college attendance on attitude toward rape were consistent with those obtained by Yankelovich (1974), Brigante (1972), and Leibowitz (1975). For three of the eight common myths about rape, the degree of agreement with myths about rape decreased with increased exposure to a college environment. The most noticeable changes generally occurred between the sophomore and junior year. In general, upperclassmen disagreed to a greater degree than did underclassmen that "Women provoke rape by their appearance and behavior." Underclassmen tended to mildly agree with the myth that "Rape is a sex crime" while upperclassmen mildly disagreed. All of the effect sizes for the observed differences between under and upperclassmen were larger than .33; however, the amount of variance in attitude toward rape that could be explained by year in college ranged from a low of 0% to a high of 4%. On the average, the year in college variable accounted for one-fourth as much variance in attitude toward rape than did the gender variable.

In summary, evidence was obtained that the majority of on-campus males and females agreed (MA, A, SA) with four of eight common myths about rape. The agreement with such myths as "Rape is a sex crime, Rape is a male exercise in power over women," and that "During a rape a woman should do everything she can to resist" may indicate a general lack of factual information about rape as suggested by Schultz (1975). This phenomenon may indicate a need for additional coverage of the topic of rape in appropriate university courses. Information concerning rape could be included in new student orientation presentations, residence hall programs, and university media sources.

Males either agreed more or disagreed less than did females to four of the eight myth statements. The most disturbing aspect of these findings, even though on the average males disagreed, was that from 9 to 60 percent of the males agreed (MA, A, SA) that "In some situations a charge of rape is unjustified" (18%), "Women provoke rape by their appearance and behavior" (21%), "If a woman is going to be raped, she might as well relax and enjoy it" (9%) and "A woman should be responsible for preventing her victimization in a rape" (60%). Agreeing with such myths may not just indicate a lack of knowledge, but may be symptomatic of a sexist attitude that is contrary to the goals of a free society for all. Efforts need to be made to involve males more fully in rape awareness programs. Publicity concerning the awareness programs should expressly state that men are encouraged to attend. The sponsorship of and active participation in these programs by fraternity and male campus leaders might increase the receptivity of the male participants.

The conclusions and recommendations presented in this section should be viewed with the knowledge that several methodological limitations may have influenced the outcomes. The sample was selected from on-campus students only and the possibility exists that these individuals may differ in some systematic manner from off-campus students. The return rate of 65%, considered by most survey researchers as an acceptable return rate, was, however, less than 100% and there exists the possibility that the respondents were systematically different from the non-respondents. Previous information concerning the validity and reliability of the ATR is lacking and consequently the precision of the measurement of an individual's attitude toward rape is unknown. However, the fact that the content of some of the ATR myth statements correspond with Qureski's (1979) myths of rape and the

fact that the results of this study corroborate the results of previous studies may be viewed as evidence of construct validity. The small number of seniors in the sample precluded a gender by year analysis of the data. Future studies should include a sufficient number of students in each year of college so as to permit the investigation of a possible gender by year interaction effect on attitude toward rape.

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